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ABSTRACT

This paper is a part of a larger study involving the way gay youth experience American public high schools. The study is focused on gay males, not lesbian or bisexual youths. The paper is divided into three sections: (1) public high schools as an organization in terms of structure and beliefs; (2) sexualized context of the high school in terms of its structure and beliefs; and (3) how gay youth experience the sexualized context. This paper argues that the context of the American public high school is not sexually neutral with respect to students, but sexualized. The high school is simultaneously heterosexualized and antihomosexualized, supporting a homophobic environment. Most administrators, teachers, staff, and students do not experience sexualized context; however, this is not the case for gay youth. They experience the high school as a sexualized environment--heterosexualized and highly antihomosexualized--which is minimally uncomfortable and maximally dangerous. (Contains 31 references.) (KDP)

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# THE SEXUALIZED CONTEXT OF AMERICAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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# THE SEXUALIZED CONTEXT OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

## Introduction

How one looks at a school as an organization determines what is seen. How one sees and experiences a school in large measure is determined by one's organizational position. Principals see and experience schools differently than teachers (Wolcott, 1973), teachers see and experience schools differently than specialists (Reed, 1980), students see and experience schools differently than teachers (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1964; Cusick, 1973), and the list goes on. It is the comparisons which can be made through the eyes and experiences of different categories of organizational members that different aspects of an organization can be viewed, examined, and systematically studied (Becker, 1963).

Recent work in the feminist tradition concerned with how females see and experience organizations in comparison to males has brought to light organizational characteristics and phenomena which until recently were relatively unrecognized (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992); Mills & Tancred, 1992). In this regard, what is true for organizations in general is also true for school in particular (Ortiz, 1982; Shakeschaft, 1992). An important conclusion from the general organization literature and that which is specifically oriented to schools is that many organization are not sexually neutral as they had been previously assumed to be but have a sexualized character and not infrequesntly engage in sexist practices (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1992).

Similar to recent work in the feminist tradition, work in the emerging gay tradition has brought to light characteristics and phenomena

of organizations which have not been previously recognized by scholars. For example, the highly publicized popular work of Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, describes characteristics and phenomena in the United State military which are heterosexualized, anti-homosexualized, and in general homophobic. Although there is an emerging literature on organizations as heterosexualized and anti-homosexualized institutions, no specific attention has been given to schools in this regard.

## Purpose

This paper is part of a larger study. The larger study concerned with the way gay youth experience American public high schools, how they manage their experiences, and the relationship of the way gay youth experience and manage their experiences with the organizational context. Within the larger study, this paper is concerned with the organizational context of American public high schools. As part of the larger study, the particular purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for the analysis of field and other data through the review and integration of relevant literature, a limited analysis of field data, and the personal experiences of the author as a teacher and administrator. The analytic framework which follows is consistent with the purposes of the larger study and has an organization theory perspective.

## Limitations

Among the limitations cited in the larger study, it is important to note one of these limitations in this paper. This limitation is concerned with the focus of the study on gay male youth and not including lesbian or bisexual youth. Due to the constraints of resources, access, and the gender of the principal investigator, it was decided to limit this study to only gay male youth. Hence, the literature reviewed and the analytic framework

developed are concerned primarily, however not exclusively, with the context of the American public high school with respect to gay male youth.

## Organization of the Paper

Following these introductory sections, the paper contains three substantive sections. The first deals with the public high school as an organization in terms of *structure* and *beliefs*. Drawing on the first section, the second section is concerned with the sexualized context of the high school in terms of its structure and beliefs. The third and final substantive section is concerned with how gay youth experience the sexualized context.

## The High School Organizational Context

The amount of time children and youth are compelled to attend school dominates their lives between the ages of five and seventeen years (Jackson, 1968). Therefore, their experience in school as an organization is important to consider. How students experience large public comprehensive high schools as organizations can be understood in terms of two analytically separate yet related aspects of social organizations (Blau & Scott, 1962). These aspects are (1) the structure of the high school and (2) the shared beliefs and orientations held by administrators, teachers, staff members, and students. In the following discussion, first the organizational structure of the high school with respect to students will be considered, and second certain shared beliefs concerning human sexuality in general and adolescent sexuality in particular held by both staff and students will be presented.

### Organizational Structure

The organizational structure and beliefs imbedded in the structure of the contemporary comprehensive American high school assume and are geared toward heterosexual youth. The high school with respect to

students has both a formal (Charters, 1964) and an informal structure (Iannaccone, 1964). The overall organizational structure contains three important scheduled elements, the curriculum, the extra-curriculum, the breaks between and within the curriculum and extra-curriculum.

The formal structure largely takes its form in the established curriculum and the classes which deliver the curriculum. Here the primary relationship is between a teacher and a class of students. In classes the relationships between students and teachers is impersonal and hierarchically structured. Within the formal structure, student conduct is set forth in school and classroom rules which are established and maintained by administrators, teachers, and other staff members, yet guided by state statutes (Reed & Himmler, 1988). The informal structure of the high school is found before school and after, during breaks and lunch periods, within the extra-curriculum, and during classes when instruction is not taking place. The informal structure can be seen in cliques, friendship groups, and isolated students. Within cliques and friendship groups, the relationships among students is intimate and personal. Within the informal structure, student conduct is controlled by social norms which are established and maintained by the students themselves, yet informed by and consistent with community values (Reed & Himmler, 1988).

Given the formal and informal structure of the contemporary American high school, students experience these structural aspects differentially. Although the official purposes of the high school are embodied in the curriculum, students largely experience the high school in terms of the extra-curriculum and the breaks within and between the curriculum and extra-curriculum. Within these two time structures, it is

the informally structure relationships which students experience most vividly (Coleman, 1961; Cusick, 1973; Gordon, 1957). Students experience high school mainly in terms of highly positive and negative affective interpersonal relationships with other students, this is to say with their peers. For the most part, students experience very few informally structured relationships with adults (Waller, 1932).

Figure 1 presents the character and intensity of student relationships in terms of the scheduled organization of the high school. The diagonal line cutting through the figure divides those relationships during scheduled times which tend to be formally structured and those which tend to be informally structured (Gordon, 1957).

**Organizational Beliefs**

Organizational beliefs are part and parcel of the organizational structure. Organizational beliefs are not the sum of the individual beliefs held by individual organizational members. Organizational beliefs are a collective phenomena and in many important ways are considered to give different organizations their particular character. Organizational beliefs are the common value orientations held collectively by organizational members regarding what is right and good with respect to the organization and their relationship to the organization (Blau & Scott, 1962). A full analysis of the organizational beliefs of the contemporary American public high school would be a lengthy discussion. Because the concern here is with the experiences of gay youth in high school, only those organizational beliefs concerning adolescence and human sexuality will be considered.

**Organizational Beliefs Regarding Human Sexuality**

With respect to how gay youth experience high school as an organization, the organizational beliefs held more-or-less collectively by

**Figure 1: The Intensity and Character of Organizational Structures in the High School with Respect to Students in the Scheduled Organization and Students' Relationships**

| | | Student Relationships in the High School | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | With Adults | With Peers |
| The Scheduled Organization of the High School | The Breaks | Not Very Frequent and Informally Structured | Very Frequent and Almost Exclusively Informally Structured |
| | The Extra-Curriculum | **FORMALLY STRUCTURED** Frequent and Formally And Informally Structured | Frequent and Formally And Informally Structured **INFORMALLY STRUCTURED** |
| | The Curriculum | Very Frequent and Almost Exclusively Formally Structured | Moderately Frequent and Primarily Informally Structured |

administrators, teachers, and other staff members are important to consider. The organizational beliefs have two aspects, one concerned with heterosexuality and the other concerned with homosexuality. The official belief of high schools regarding heterosexuality in general, albeit implicit, is that heterosexuality is *normal* (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Hence, heterosexuality is good and desirable, and children exhibiting heterosexual conduct should be encouraged and rewarded. The general embodiment of the heterosexual belief is the image of "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports" (Goffman, 1963, p. 128). And, the specific high school embodiment of the belief is the younger version of the general image. Typically, it is the image of the well proportioned high school male with good athletic ability, acceptable scholastic performance, and well developed social skills (Coleman, 1961).

The unofficial organizational belief regarding homosexuality is that homosexuality is *abnormal*. The term *unofficial* is used here because this belief is typically not formalized, although it is nonetheless pervasive. Hence, homosexuality is bad, and deviant, and children exhibiting homosexual conduct should be punished. The embodiment of this belief is the image of an effeminate, vain male who talks too much (Goffman, 1963, p. 39).

With respect to adolescent sexuality, educators believe that sexual orientation of pre-adolescents is largely undifferentiated and that during adolescence rapid cognitive and physical changes take place (Foucault, 1980; Opotow, 1992; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). It is during these changes that sexual orientation becomes differentiated and fixed into appropriate

gender sex role orientations (Waller, 1932). Educators believe that the differentiation and fixing of appropriate sex orientations is context dependent. Hence, the school environment is exceedingly important in establishing the appropriate heterosexual identities of children (Foucault, 1980). An appropriately heterosexual curriculum linked with an appropriate heterosexual extra-curriculum and staffed by carefully screened heterosexual personnel is essential. Furthermore, the organizational support of appropriate adult and student norms regarding the personal, group, and organizational incentives and rewards for heterosexual conduct and disincentives and punishments for homosexual conduct is important. In essence, the official and unofficial organizational belief is that heterosexuality is the normal course of child development, but that its course can be disrupted or changed in a contaminated environment. One important potential source of contamination is the presence of homosexuality in the curriculum, extra-curriculum, and break times, in organizational and group norms, and in personally held values, as well as the presence of students and adults who represent themselves or are represented as homosexual. There is the strong and pervasive belief that homosexuality is a contagious disease and, hence, must not be allowed to contaminate the high school as an organization. Any hint of homosexuality must be eradicated. The emergence of AIDS has provided further support for this belief. In part, the belief that homosexuality is contagious is what is meant by the term *homophobia* (Sears, 1992) and what stands behind what is referred to as "school-sanctioned homophobia" (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992, p. 18).

## The Sexualized Organizational Context

Although not generally recognized or acknowledged, the

contemporary American high school presents itself as a highly sexualized organizational environment. The curriculum is an interpretation of state statues (Reed & Himmler, 1988) and, for the most part, is intendedly sexually neutral. Most courses in the high school curriculum are explicitly concerned with subject matter other than human sexuality. Notable exceptions include sex education units and courses, health classes, family living courses, and similar curricular offerings. Community controversy in school districts is legendary regarding these courses and their course content. Although the subject of human sexuality is in most cases not explicitly part of the formal state mandated curriculum, implicitly the formal curriculum has strong heterosexual and anti-homosexual themes.

The design of the curriculum and assignment of students to classes is along gender lines with the expectation that gender will follow a heterosexual orientation. A normative symbolic representation of heterosexuality frequently occurs in curricular materials, texts, pictures, posters, music, plays, and student publications. Similar to the curriculum, the design of certain parts of the high school facility is along gender lines with the expectation that the sexual orientations of students will be heterosexual are commonplace; rest rooms and gymnasium locker rooms are examples. Hence, although the school curriculum is intendedly sexually neutral in most instances, the curriculum is implicitly heterosexual.

The implicit anti-homosexual theme in the curriculum is manifest through teacher certification and counselor training. Penalties can be meted out to teachers who represent themselves or are represented as homosexuals (Harbeck, 1992). Therefore, homosexual teachers disguise and hide any aspect of their homosexuality (Woods & Harbeck, 1992;

Romanovsky, 1991). School counselors and teachers may regard adolescent homosexuality as a temporary adolescent condition and a treatable disease. The implicit anti-homosexual theme in the formal curriculum is also manifest in its absence in the curriculum, typically even in those classes where sexuality is a legitimate topic of presentation and discussion. Except in very specific and rare places, the presentation of homosexuality as a reality is absent. If presented in the curriculum, homosexuality is presented in the context of a mild social problem yet a very serious personal problem. Hence, it can be concluded that the curriculum of the high school is implicitly yet strongly sexualized. In general, the curriculum is simultaneously and implicitly heterosexual and anti-homosexual.

Whereas student activity in the formal curriculum is structured to be primarily passive (Cusick, 1973), student activity in the extra-curriculum is structured to be active. In extracurricular activities, students are trained and coached to perform traditional adult roles, and these roles have a highly public and visible character. Athletic competitions, musical and drama productions, school newspaper and annual production, various team academic competitions, and a host of sanctioned social activities are examples of extracurricular activities in which students are expected to perform publicly and display adult or adult-like roles.

Consistent with typical community values (Reed & Himmler, 1988), the extra-curriculum, in contrast to the curriculum, is explicitly heterosexual. Yet similar to the formal curriculum, the extra-curriculum is implicitly anti-homosexual. In extra-curricular activities, boys are expected to display the appropriate heterosexual roles of men, and girls are expected to play the appropriate heterosexual roles of women. A sense

of embarrassment arises in community members, parents, administrators, teachers, and other students when these roles are played out publicly by students in childlike ways. The implicit anti-homosexual theme becomes apparent when boys play out these roles in ways which boys are interpreted to be sissies, wousses, candy asses, fairies, fags, or other common terms associated with gay men. If this should occur, public humiliation is likely to follow. Public humiliation typically comes from peers, particularly male athletes, "the jocks" as they are known in high schools. When public humiliation occurs, typically professional school personnel do not engage in this activity. Yet when professional school personnel are aware of such activity, they do not halt the activity. However, male high school athletic coaches have reputations for engaging in harassment when boys, in their estimation, publicly engage in behavior stereotypically associated with male homosexuals.

During break times, including before and after school and lunch, the informal organization of the school is most apparent. Although for students, breaks are times for informality, they do have both formal and informal aspects. The formal aspect of breaks are implicitly heterosexual and implicitly anti-sexual. Although student conduct during breaks is less rigidly controlled than during curricular and extracurricular times, the limits of student conduct during breaks are codified in what are known as *school rules*. These relatively simple and few rules prescribe the normative relationships of students to the school as an organization and the relationships of students to each other (Bidwell, 1970). It is high school vice principals who typically supervise scheduled breaks and enforce school rules (Reed & Conners, 1983; Reed & Himmler, 1988).

Some of these rules are explicitly heterosexual in character. For

example, a rule which allows students to hold hands but not to kiss each other in school corridors both presumes and prescribes heterosexual relationships among students. Although there are typically not explicit anti-homosexual rules, student activities which may be construed by break supervisors as minimally symbolizing homosexuality is immediately negatively sanctioned. In the 1960s, the long hair of high school boys angered school administrators because in their eyes long hair on boys symbolized femininity and hinted at homosexuality. Numerous court cases followed the school's attempt to enforce hair codes for high school boys (Flygare, 1975). And, in the 1980s when some high school boys began to wear a single earring, this also angered school administrators for the same reasons. For example, a high school administrator during a break approached a boy with and earring. Clutching the earring between his thumb and forefinger, the administrator said to the boy, "You fag, you fag, you fag!"

It is within the formal structure of the breaks, that the school becomes explicitly heterosexual and explicitly anti-homosexual. During the breaks students have very few relationships with adults and have almost exclusively informally structured relationship with other students. It is during the breaks when the "adolescent society" (Coleman, 1961) becomes most apparent and explicit.

The adolescent society has it own norms which are largely not under the control of school officials. These norms prescribe student social conduct within and between groups and between individual students. Many of these norms involve the appropriate gender roles and the application of the norms under various circumstances for boys or girls. Examples include gender appropriate grooming, dress, personal posture

and carriage, sitting and relaxing positions, mannerisms, and ways to carry various articles and items. Personal sexuality and its display as well as sexual relationships between students both in and out of the high school are also important social norms held by students. Typically, these norms assume and prescribe appropriate heterosexual relationships between and among students. Two examples include who can approach whom, and under what conditions, to initiate intimate relationships, i.e. dates, and the appropriate forms and public displays of bodily contact between boys and girls, e.g. holding hands, embraces, and kissing. Students who conform with these types of norms are rewarded with social status by the students themselves.

Also among the norms concerned with sexuality, are norms against homosexual conduct particularly that which might be exhibited by boys. Boys who are perceived to exhibit the slightest hint of any stereotypical homosexual behavior are dismissed by their peers as sissies, wousses, and candy asses. Boys who may display what might be interpreted as stronger signs of stereotypical homosexual behavior are regarded by their peers as fairies, queers, and fags. Any high school boy perceived to exhibit any stereotypical behavior associate with homosexual males is subject to verbal abuse by other boys which may also be accompanied by physical assaults. Typically these assaults are done out of view of school officials, but when they are in view, school officials typically neither stop the assaults nor punish the offenders.

For gay youth it is the scheduled breaks which are the most troublesome because they are the center of the school experience for students, and it is during breaks where the school is most emphatically and explicitly anti-homosexualized.

The high school as an organization presents a highly sexualized environment (Shakeshaft, 1992) for students. The character of the sexualized organizational context is presented in Figure 2. Although most students and staff experience this environment as naturally given and non-problematic to the extent that the high school's environment is not experienced as sexualized in any particular way, gay youth do not experienced the high school in this same way. Gay youth learn from direct experience, "taunts, teasing, ostracism, and fights," that the high school is most certainly anti-homosexual (Goffman, 1963, p. 33).

## The High School Experience

Almost all high school students experience the high school organization as social, rather than academic (Coleman, 1961; Cusick, 1973; Gordon, 1957). The students experience the social organization with respect to their peers rather than adults, including administrators, teachers, and other staff members. It is primarily through the informally structured relationships during breaks, extracurricular activities, and even during the scheduled curriculum that students experience the social, rather than the academic, organization of the high school (Cusick, 1973). The social organization is experienced primarily through membership in small friendship and interest related groups and participating in the activities of these groups.

With respect to the sexualized character of the organization as noted earlier, students do not experience it as particularly sexualized. The strongly heterosexualized context of the high school is not experienced by most students as anything particularly significant because it is consistent and harmonious with their personal backgrounds and the larger community context of the high school. The heterosexualized character of

**Figure 2: The Sexualized Organizational Context of the High School**

| | | Student Relationships in the High School | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | With Adults | With Peers |
| The Scheduled Organization of the High School | The Breaks | Explicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Implicitly Anti-Homosexual | Explicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Explicitly Anti-Homosexual |
| | The Extra-Curriculum | **FORMALLY STRUCTURED**<br><br>Explicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Implicitly Anti-Homosexual | Explicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Explicitly Anti-Homosexual<br><br>**INFORMALLY STRUCTURED** |
| | The Curriculum | Implicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Implicitly Anti-Homosexual | Explicitly Heterosexual<br><br>Implicitly Anti Homosexual |

the school is experienced as given and non-problematic.

Gay youth in most ways experience the high school organization in much the same way as non-gay youth. This is to say that gay youth experience the school as a social organization through their affiliation with small groups and individual friendships and through participating in activities associated with these relationships. Similar to other students, gay youth do not experience the high school as a particular hetero-sexualized environment. However, gay youth experience the pervasive anti-homosexual character of the high school as an important and powerful (Mitchell & Spady, 1983) aspect of their high school experience. This organizational power is translated into experiencing the high school as uncertain and unpredictable. Much of the time gay youth experience high school as being alone in a hostile environment.

## Summary

This paper has argued that the context of the American public high school is not sexually neutral with respect to students, but sexualized. The high school is simultaneously hetersexualized and anti-homosexualized supporting a homophobic environment. It has also been argued that most administrators, teachers, staff, and students do not experience sexualized context. However, this is not the case for gay youth. They experience the high school as a sexualized environment--heterosexualized and highly anti-homosexualized--which is minimally uncomfortable and maximally dangerous.

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